New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

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1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years
Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1953 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
*Can-Can	304
Charley's Aunt	179
Dead Pigeon	176
End as a Man	250
Fifth Season (The)	380
In the Summer House	168
John Murray Anderson's Almanac	191
Kind Sir	325
*Kismet	198
Late Love	258
Madam, Will You Walk	201
Me and Juliet	298
My 3 Angels	334
Oh, Men, Oh, Women!	184
Picnic	348
Prescott Proposals (The)	187
Remarkable Mr. Pennypacker (The)	165
Sabrina Fair	217
Sing Till Tomorrow	172
*Solid Gold Cadillac (The)	222
*Tea and Sympathy	266
*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)	254
Wonderful Town	344

1952 Vol.

Dial M for Murder	215
*Seven Year Itch (The)	186

1951 Vol.

King and I (The)	304

1949 Vol.

South Pacific	312

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 29, 1954*

1954 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1954

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
*Abie's Irish Rose	248
All Summer Long	304
*Anniversary Waltz	339
*Boy Friend (The)	299
Burning Glass (The)	357
By the Beautiful Sea	335
*Caine Mutiny Court Martial (The)	382
Confidential Clerk (The)	370
Coriolanus	385
*Dear Charles	316
*Fanny	256
Fragile Fox	286
Girl in Pink Tights (The)	354
Girl on the Via Flaminia (The)	349
Golden Apple (The)	346
Hayride	319
His and Hers	393
Home Is the Hero	307
Immoralist (The)	373
King of Hearts	342
*Living Room (The)	251
Lullaby	377
Mademoiselle Colombe	397
Magic and the Loss (The)	332
Midsummer Night's Dream (A)	311
*On Your Toes	289
Ondine	362
One Eye Closed	236
*Pajama Game (The)	324
*Peter Pan	273
*Quadrille	259
*Rainmaker (The)	264
*Reclining Figure	294
*Sandhog	239
Sea Gull (The)	327
Sing Me No Lullaby	279
Starcross Story (The)	390
*Tender Trap (The)	282
Traveling Lady (The)	267
*Wedding Breakfast	243
Winner (The)	365
CRTICS' CIRCLE AWARD	330

Theatre Openings

"Sandhog" "One Eye Closed"
"Wedding Breakfast"

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 29, 1954

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"One Eye Closed"

New York Herald Tribune
November 25, 1954

THEATER

'One Eye Closed'

By WALTER F. KERR

A Horse Named Moe

THE most intelligent of the various performers connected with "One Eye Closed," the new enterprise at the Bijou, is a horse named Moe. Moe is on stage at the opening of the play. He remains on stage just so long as he is being fed. The moment the feed runs out, he leaves. He does not come back. Moe is a horse to watch.

• • •

If Moe had come back, here are some of the things he might have seen:

A young husband (Tom Helmore) wrangling with his young wife (Haila Stoddard, pinch-hitting for indisposed actress Constance Ford) over the fact that they are broke and have to live in a Connecticut stable;

The stable doors bursting open to admit three ex-Yale men, in identical jackets, singing a school song, doing a snake dance, and announcing that they and the young husband are going to a class reunion disguised as convicts;

The stable doors bursting open to admit one large 1903 automobile, painted red and boasting gold carriage-lamps, which turns out to be the vehicle in which the young husband intends to drive to Yale;

The stable windows bursting open to admit an ex-lover of the young wife who is actually a convict—do the play's complexities begin to dawn on you? —and who is prepared to reseduce the young wife and also to tune the barn piano;

The 1903 automobile chugging home along (I guess) the Merritt Parkway, the while the celebrants—still in convict uniform —use its various appurtenances to open beer cans, shooting the beer wildly all over the stage.

• • •

Moe would also have seen—unless he gently closed his blinders over both eyes—an otherwise unidentified American Indian doing absolutely nothing, a v.i.p from Sing-Sing begging the convict (John Baragrey) to come home in time to pitch the big game of the season, a squeaky-voice redhead making calf-eyes at every man in black-and-white stripes, and a whole bevy of armed and shooting Sheriffs, Sergeants, and State Police. And I hate to think he missed a moment in which an actor swung a golf club and whacked a ball right smack into one of Eldon Elder's painted backdrops. I think this last bit hurt the illusion.

• • •

Among the character names listed on the program—this may help to identify the style of the piece—are Frenchy Mulligan, Trixie Tyson, Cokey Mulqueen II, and, of course, An American Indian. The play was, I believe, written some time after "Abie's Irish Rose," but it has not yet quite caught its air of sophistication.

Sample snatch of the Justin Sturm dialogue:

"How would you like to go to jail?"

"Oh, I've been to Yale."

On the first page of the Playbill the piece is described as a farce. Many harsh things have been said about farce. This is the harshest.

"ONE EYE CLOSED"

Farce by Justin Sturm; staged by Romney Brent; scenery and lighting by Eldon Elder; costumes by Virginia Volland; presented by Haila Stoddard at the Bijou Theatre, November 24, 1954. The cast:

Gordon Cameron..Tom Helmore
Denia Cameron...Haila Stoddard
Easter Sunday.....Moe
Mary Benson....Marjorie Eaton
Frenchy Mulligan..Harry Ellerbe
Trixie Tyson....Moultrie Patten
Cy Milton.....John Fiedler
Sheriff Meyers..Iggie Wolfington
Elsa Kinney..Parker McCormick
Lowell Markey...John Baragrey
Cokey Mulqueen II.....
George Mathews
Sergeant (State Police).....
Charles Bellin
State Policeman.....
Richard Everhart
An American Indian.....
Hal Thompson

Daily Mirror
November 25, 1954

'One Eye Closed' Opens At The Bijou Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Haila Stoddard has been at work for many months readying Justin Sturm's "One Eye Closed" for Broadway. So it would be pleasant this morning to report that the new arrival at the Bijou Theatre is a hit. But, even with one eye closed, we honestly could not.

THE TROUBLE with the Sturm play is that it might have been satire, but isn't. It settles for farce and on that basis, is incredible. And when you can't believe in characters and what they do, the theatre can be a dull and unrewarding place in which to spend an evening.

Sturm would have us think that a pretty girl from a well-to-do family married a Yale graduate with a penchant for losing their and other people's money in the stock market. At curtain's rise, they are living in a stable owned by, of all things, a horse. With only six bucks in the sugar bowl.

This, the Old Blue donates to a charity lottery, winning a vintage Winton because no one else bought any tickets. He uses the jalopy to go to a class reunion, in the hopes of bettering his fortunes. In his absence, a Harvard grad and former beau of the Eli's wife, serving a term in Sing Sing for embezzlement, breaks out of stir when he learns that she is having financial trouble.

• • •

THE HARVARD grad rewrites the absent husband's manuscript on the stock market into a slick and salable tome, tunes up a broken down piano and finally surrenders to a sheriff so that the wife can collect a $60,000 reward. After all, she really prefers her well meaning but ineffectual husband, and pals at Sing Sing need the escapee to pitch their big game with the Alcatraz nine.

There are the elements for an amusing comedy in all these situations, but Sturm and director Romney Brent haven't been able to fashion them into anything better than a sophomoric romp. This, despite the presence in the cast of such ingratiating and skillful players as Tom Helmore, John Baragrey, George Mathews, Parker McCormick and Iggie Wolfington.

When leading lady Constance Ford was stricken with appendicitis Wednesday morning, producer Stoddard took her place on short notice. And gave a most attractive performance as the wife torn between exasperated affection for her fumbling husband and rueful admiration for the capable and clever jailbird.

• • •

IN JUSTICE to playwright Sturm, it must be admitted that he is not afraid of plot. He's not one of those mood writers. He has imagination and a sense of what ought to be funny. Yet he has been unable to harness his gifts for humor and invention this time out. He's an author to watch, however.

As for Miss Stoddard, she is a conscientious manager as well as a talented actress. We happen to know of the labor and thought that went into the preparation of "One Eye Closed" for Manhattan. It is a saga of courage and devotion to the theatre. We only wish that the ending could be a happier one.

Journal-American

November 25, 1954

Wacky Farce Fails to Click

Tale of Escaped Jailbird

Just a Crazy, Mixed-Up Plot

By JOHN McCLAIN

JUST before the curtain went up on "One Eye Closed," which opened at the Bijou Theatre last night, the announcement was made that due to illness Constance Ford would not play her part and, instead, Haila Stoddard would take over.

Well, Miss Stoddard is also the producer, and apart from this she is the mother of three, acts five days a week on a TV serial called "The Secret Storm," and is a regular Sunday night panelist on "I Made the News" over WPIX. She has obviously over-extended herself.

This is not the space, nor am I the authority, to pass on the merits of her other ventures, but I do feel called upon to state that even though she owns the words to "One Eye Closed" she would have been well advised to leave them unuttered. This is the most mixed-up mish-mash seen this season.

Extraneous Props

There is a full-sized horse in the first act, operating under the quaint name of Moe, and later on there is a 1903 Winton automobile (courtesy of James Melton, who would have been more courteous if he'd just come out and sung a few songs), and neither of these props have very much to do with the plot. In fact, it is rather difficult to figure out just what DOES have to do with the plot.

It appears that John Baragrey, an extremely attractive Harvard graduate, has escaped from Sing Sing and taken refuge in Connecticut at exactly the convenient time that a group of Yale alumni are dressed up like convicts for their reunion at New Haven.

And if you think this is funny, which not too many people did, wait until I tell you that he hides out in the household of no less a person than Haila Stoddard, a former flame, who is married to one of the Yales.

You can see the obvious (repeat—obvious) possibilities in this situation. But in fairness to Justin Sturm, the author, it must be admitted that when he goes in for sheer wackiness he can be quite funny.

Confusing Plot

There is, for example, a good scene with George Mathews, in which he is appealing to Baragrey to return to Sing Sing just to pitch the traditional game against the Alcatraz ball team. But then he gets back into the plot, or the 1903 Winton, and everything becomes confused. I will go all the way with farce any time, but once you start it you should stick with it. "One Eye Closed" doesn't.

There is no information about when or how Miss Stoddard was injected into the leading lady's role in her own play, but she certainly carried it off competently. And I thought Tom Helmore, Mr. Baragrey, Mr. Mathews, Parker McCormick, Iggie Wolfington and the others did a creditable job with a bewildering property.

In sum and substance, however, it was tough enough to keep one eye OPEN.

DAILY NEWS

November 25, 1954

New Farce, 'One Eye Closed,' Has Failed to Keep Both Its Eyes Open

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Farce is the confidence game of the theatre. To be good it should, like a carnival con man, be sly, slippery, quick and heartless—but innocent-looking enough to fool the customers.

Justin Sturm's farce, "One Eye Closed," which was presented last evening at the Bijou Theatre, is not quite slick enough to take me in.

A good con man should be able to lie his way out of anything, and Sturm's trouble is that he can't tell enough lies to keep me fooled for three acts. He starts well, with a couple who are living with a horse in a Connecticut barn because they are broke. They are broke because the husband is a writer, which is a sound basis for any kind of play up to and including tragedy.

Not Enough Lies

Then the playwright's whim is that the writer wins a 1903 Winton automobile—a sidewinder with a hind entrance—in a raffle and, with a carload of companions, set out for Yale for a class reunion. The class is supposed to dress as convicts, with striped suits. It is another fancy of the playwright's that a real convict, also in a striped suit, escapes from Sing Sing and makes his way to the writer's barn because he was in love with the writer's wife before he got sent up the river for innocent embezzlement.

The farce goes on like this, very amiably and with some funny scenes and lines—and with several attractive performances by the actors. There are a deputy sheriff, a state trooper, a manhunt, gunfire, a slight dab of sex and some enjoyable untruths—but not enough of any to keep a playgoer's mind unoccupied. And the secret of good screwball comedy is to keep the mind unoccupied by telling the playgoer a new lie before he has a chance to mull over the last one. For example, it is common knowledge that very few prisoners north of the South wear striped suits these days, but in "One Eye Closed" a number of players spend most of the evening dressed like Venetian blinds.

Hail to Haila

All the performances are affable. Last evening Haila Stoddard, producer of the play, went into the leading feminine role on short notice when the regular leading lady, Constance Ford, got taken with appendicitis. This is not as remarkable a feat as it may sound, for Miss Stoddard had played the role on the resort circuit last summer and was familiar with it. But any time Miss Stoddard appears in any play means a pleasant time for me, for she is a beautiful, graceful and expert comedienne.

Miss Stoddard's writer husband is played agreeably by Tom Helmore, and the escaped convict is portrayed very smoothly by John Baragrey. Among the minor performances, Miss Parker McCormick's comic impersonation of a nosy neighbor is excellent. Eldon Elder has made a good Connecticut barn setting, and Romney Brent has directed the comedy with the proper tongue-in-cheek attitude.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 26, 1954

'One Eye Closed' Shuts for Good

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Even an engaging and talented cast, and a facility for comic invention, failed to keep "One Eye Closed" open for very long. It was outlandish and far-fetched, instead of funny or even farcical.

The show that opened Wednesday and closed Thursday at the Bijou had the sort of narrative that splashed all over the stage all through the evening. Lots of it was coincidence and lots of it was nonsense. But there was enough workable stuff there for certain actors to prove disconcertingly winning at odd moments.

A no-account writer was determined to go to his college reunion dressed as a convict. His wife had an old beau who was residing in Sing Sing.

Back to His Youth.

The husband won a 1903 Winton in a raffle, with the last money he and his wife had. This picturesque gocart provided his transportation back to the scenes of his youth.

Naturally the convict escaped when he learned how hard up the wife was. Doffing his stripes, he managed to get himself locked up with her for the night by the sheriff, through a process too complicated to review.

In the end, when put to the test, the wife chose her husband, quite unaccountably, over the convict. The former had charm, but was a case of retarded development. The jailbird also had charm, but could make all kinds of livings.

Typical of the strained humor of the play was the fact that the couple had a horse for a landlord. More entertaining situations were the ones in which a fellow convict tried to make the escapee return, to pitch the big game with Alcatraz.

There were nice sly remarks, too, though not often enough, like the one the convict made to the girl, that he would get her a whole new wardrobe as soon as the stores closed.

A good deal of interest was aroused by the fact that Haila Stoddard, the producer, had a few days previously taken over the leading role from Constance Ford, victim of sudden appendicitis.

Good as Actress.

Miss Stoddard performed as if she had been playing the role for weeks. I wish she were as calm and collected about choosing plays to produce as she was about acting.

Tom Helmore and John Baragrey were the husband and the convict, respectively. Two more personable leading men would be hard to find anywhere.

New York Post

November 26, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Farce About a Runaway Convict

Let us consider today the case of a young actress with the somewhat ambiguous name of Parker McCormick. A few weeks ago Miss McCormick opened on Broadway in a comedy called "The Tender Trap." Everyone liked her performance, and the play gives every indication of running throughout the season. Nevertheless, with a restlessness not unknown to thespians, she decided to give up what appears to be a fairly steady job and join the cast of Justin Sturm's "One Eye Closed," which opened at the Bijou Wednesday night.

She is now unemployed, since the show closed down last night after three performances.

Then there is the case of Haila Stoddard, who produced Mr. Sturm's farce. Miss Stoddard is also an actress, and a very good one, with a charming and intelligent gift for comedy. Constance Ford, who was to have been the heroine of "One Eye Closed," was taken sick during the Boston tryout, and, in the best dramatic manner of the theater, the producer stepped into her role for the opening performance. In the stage's most romantic tradition, Miss Stoddard had a gratifying success as a performer. But I'm afraid she wasn't equally happy in picking a play to produce.

Men of Yale

It just goes to show that all sorts of things, chiefly disappointing, can happen in the theater, including farces like "One Eye Closed." I think Mr. Sturm deserves credit for frankly labeling his play as a farce. He also merits commendation for bringing in a somewhat extraneous vaudeville scene in which some alcoholic Yale men, dressed in convicts' uniforms for their class reunion, are returning in an ancient and collapsible Winton automobile. There is also an Indian who pops up for no identifiable reason and who amused me.

At this point, however, I come abruptly to the end of the pleasant post-holiday thoughts I can devote to "One Eye Closed." For the melancholy fact is that Mr. Sturm's farce seems to be of about the vintage of that Winton car, which is 1903. There is quite a lot of plot for so minor an antic. It has something or other to do with the juxtaposition of those gay Yale alumni in their convict costumes and a handsome Harvard man, whose prison garb is the real thing, because he has run away from Sing Sing to visit the wife of one of the New Haven boys.

Prison Envoy

There is much more than that. It includes, for one detail, a convict named Cokey Mulqueen II, who calls on the escaped prisoner at the request of the warden to beg him to return and pitch for the Sing Sing ball team in the big game against Alcatraz. But, although there seems to be the material present for an amiably lunatic entertainment, most of it turns out to be curiously lacking in all the instincts of festivity. Despite the ministrations of some expert farceurs, an air of tired antiquity hangs pall-like over the evening's proceedings.

Those expert farceurs include, in addition to Miss Stoddard as the wife desirable to both Yale and Harvard men, Tom Helmore as her impecunious husband, John Baragrey as the romantic convict, George Mathews as the warden's envoy, Iggy Wolfington as a bewildered sheriff and Miss McCormick as a family friend who enjoys trouble. It is assuredly not their fault that "One Eye Closed" turns out to be a feeble jest . . . Note to Variety, in lieu of a playmeter: This is not intended as a favorable or "inconclusive" notice.

The New York Times

November 25, 1954

Theatre: Holiday Bird

On the Menu at Bijou: 'One Eye Closed'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AS the producer of "One Eye Closed," which opened at the Bijou last evening, Haila Stoddard has one occupational asset. She is an actress and can replace the ladies in her cast.

Constance Ford, her leading actress, was too ill last evening to appear as Denia Cameron in Justin Sturm's farce. Having played the part on the silo circuit last summer, Miss Stoddard replaced Miss Ford expertly. Only the men in Miss Stoddard's company have job security.

Not much job security, it is feared. For Mr. Sturm's Connecticut antic is a labored quip about a dull though virtuous Yale man and a dashing Harvard crook. After three acts of desperate hocus-pocus, the leading lady chooses the Yale man. No comment will be made on her selection in this place at this time.

Among the props used in "One Eye Closed" is a horse, munching oats to one side of the stage in the first act, and a 1903 Winton automobile provided by James Melton. The car is the more interesting of the props. It cranks on the side. Passengers climb into the rear seat through a door in the back. Several years later Winton manufactured a six with a torpedo body that looked very smart and daring. Forty miles an hour in that six was no more terrifying than forty-five in rival cars. Tom Helmore and some of the other actors devote quite a lot of good clean fun to Mr. Melton's Winton. Still and all, some things should be sacred.

Mr. Helmore plays the Yale man who is honest though incompetent. Under Romney Brent's direction, Mr. Helmore bounces around satisfactorily. John Baragrey plays the felonious Harvard man, naturally with more reserve. George Mathews acts a Sing Sing undergraduate with his usual innocent charm.

But Iggie Wolfington and Parker McCormick come closer to farcical technique. Mr. Wolfington is the sharp-nosed comic who played the temperamental chef in "Mrs. McThing." As an addled Sheriff in "One Eye Closed" he is good-natured and amusing. Miss McCormick (the masculine "Parker" is a switch) is the red-haired blonde who opened in "The Tender Trap" a few weeks ago to general acclaim. She has an unreliable voice and an ambiguous attitude toward the other characters. She gives an impression of hoping to be involved in a scandal.

There's no scandal in "One Eye Closed." There's not much amusement in it either.

"Sandhog"

DAILY NEWS

November 24, 1954

'Sandhog' an Unexciting Musical About an Exciting Enterprise

By JOHN CHAPMAN

From a short story by Theodore Dreiser which I have not read and doubtless won't, the Phoenix Theatre and something called Rachel Productions have made a dreary, self-conscious and oddly mannered musical titled "Sandhog," which was presented at the Phoenix on Second Ave. last evening. All the trouble everybody went to could have been avoided if they had simply hired Jimmy Savo to sing, recite and act out the whole thing in the manner of Savo's classic rendition of "River, Stay Way From My Door."

The authors of "Sandhog" are Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt. Their combined work strikes me as a dissonant recitative, for I failed to latch on to one whole song all evening. In my mind and ear it cannot compare with last season's Phoenix musical, "The Golden Apple," lyrically, musically or intellectually.

Beautiful Setting.

"Sandhog," which calls itself a ballad in three acts in the program, concerns itself with the building of the first train tunnel—the Hudson & Manhattan tube—under the North River in the late 1880s. This was a new enterprise fraught with lurking dangers, and the men who did the work and took the risks were a new breed of laborers. These sandhogs, working in compressed air beneath the river for $2 a day, faced many hazards. They might get the bends or the willies from too quick decompression or they might get blown right up through the river-bottom mud in an air explosion. It was a tough life which took tough men and killed many.

With considerable social self-consciousness the authors seek to tell the story of a few of these brave men and their brave wives. Within the framework of Howard Bay's beautifully imagined setting—a setting which can switch from the river bottom to the streets and dingy homes of the New York waterfront with the twist of an electrician's wrist—"Sandhog" could be an exciting story, even without music. But it isn't, even in the melodramatic instant of a subterranean blowout, because it lacks continuity and a point of view. The music seems to me to suffer from the same lack.

Neither Fish Nor Fowl

Among the players occupied with "Sandhog" are Jack Cassidy and David Brooks as a pair of strong Irish buckos and Betty Oakes and Alice Ghostley as their suffering wives. Howard da Silva has staged the offering insecurely, and Sophie Maslow has devised a few unremarkable dances for a ballet of five cheerful and attractive children.

"Sandhog" is in the dilemma of not being a good social tract about the downtrodden, underpaid laboring class and not being a good music-show, either. The next Phoenix Theatre production will be Shaw's "The Doctor's Dilemma." Good old Dr. Shaw.

"SANDHOG"

Ballad in three acts by Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt, based on the short story "St. Columba and the River" by Theodore Dreiser; staged by Howard Da Silva; settings by Howard Bay; choreography by Sophie Maslow; musical director Ben Steinberg; orchestrations by Hershey Kay; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton by special arrangement with Rachel Productions at the Phoenix Theatre, November 23, 1954. The cast:

Sandy.....David Winters
Small Fry.....Eliot Feld
Girl With a Ball...Betty Ageloff
Ring Leader.....Yuriko
Red.....Muriel Mannings
Air Lock Foreman..John Carter
Night Shift Foreman..David Hooks
Sam on the Stick.....Leon Bibb
Henderson...Mordecai Bauman
Policeman...Robert De Cormier
Bill Cayton.....Douglas Collins
Johnny O'Sullivan..Jack Cassidy
Fred Burger.....Paul Ukena
Joe Novak....Michael Kermoyan
Andy Cayton..Rodester Timmons
Tim Cavanaugh....David Brooks
Katie O'Sullivan....Betty Oakes
Sharkey.....Gordon Dilworth
Sheela Cavanaugh..Alice Ghostley
Mary Novak.....Mary Kane
Ginny Cayton...Mareda Gaither

Daily Mirror

November 24, 1954

'Sandhog' Ballad Opens At The Phoenix Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Things are picking up downtown at the Phoenix Theatre. After starting the current season with a rather dismal play called "Sing Me No Lullaby," T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton have followed with "Sandhog," by Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt.

THOUGH IT IS on the arty and pretentious side, the new arrival has both amusing and moving episodes. Based on Theodore Dreiser's short story, "St Columba and the River," it has to do with an Irish lad who lands in New York back in the '80s, becomes a tunnel worker, then a foreman who takes too many chances and finally atones for his mistakes by getting himself blown through the river bed into a hospital.

Though Robinson and Salt call their work "a ballad in three acts," it has the aims and airs of folk opera. The libretto has sporadic excitements that somehow fail to become cumulative, driving drama. The score, replete with solos, duets, quartets and choruses, has a tendency toward monotony.

But it does burst out once in a while into such attractive melodies as "Johnny O" and "Katie O'Sullivan," and it has the advantage of an imaginative orchestration by Hershey Kay, who uses novel instrumental combinations cleverly indeed. And it is beautifully sung by a first-rate cast.

JACK CASSIDY is in fine voice as the cocky Johnny O'Sullivan. Betty Oakes offers excellent top notes, though she has a tendency to become muffled in recitative, as his loyal wife. David Brooks does justice to a cynical but helpful sandhog. But Alice Ghostley, whose comedy antics in "New Faces" were so hilarious, contributes the surprise of the evening in a serious note.

Douglas Collins, Rodester Timmons, Mareda Gaither, Mordecai Bauman, Paul Ukena, Michael Kermoyan, Gordon Dilworth, Mary Kane, David Winters, Eliot Feld, Betty Ageloff, Muriel Manings and Yuriko are good in other parts.

Director Howard Da Silva has gotten solid acting and conductor Ben Steinberg admirable singing from the company. Sophie Maslow has choreographed spirited dance take-offs on kids' street games. And Howard Bay has designed a setting that looks like a quarter of a globe which expands into such locales as a drab apartment, an old-fashioned saloon and the inside of a growing tunnel.

"SANDHOG" has a message: to heck with the good old days. Yep, even back in the '80's they were talking about the good old days, unfavorably, too, as reported by Robinson and Salt. For they make them seem dangerous and depressing.

This is a sombre musical for, we think, a limited audience. It lacks the gaiety, sparkle and ingenuity that made "The Golden Apple," its predecessor at the Phoenix, such an entertaining delight. As we overheard a neighbor observe: "This one isn't for the tired business man." And it's not exactly our dish of tea, either.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

November 24, 1954

THEATER

'Sandhog'

By WALTER F. KERR

Hudson River Blues

"Glory be and a thousand thanks for this accursed day," cries out one of the worried immigrant women in the Phoenix' new musical play, "Sandhog." She goes on to remember a fable from the old sod: the story of a village that lived in terror of a neighborhood dragon. The dragon woke for a week, then slept for a week. When he was awake, the village shook with fear. But when he slept, he slept on the key of the larder—and the village starved. They were one and all delighted, then, on that dreadful day when he lifted his head again.

The fable accurately describes the grim and ironic saga that Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt have set to music. The dragon in this instance is the Hudson River Tunnel, being blasted out of the mud in the 1880s. It is awake when the men are working, crumpling up with the "willies" and the "bends" and sometimes going home on stretchers. It is asleep when the men have called a halt to their exploitation — and chosen to starve.

Working or starving, the out-at-elbows crew at the Phoenix are lifting their heads in song. The refrain is sometimes light and lyrical (there are charming Irish derivations called "Johnny O" and "Katie O'Sullivan"), sometimes earthy (a song about sweat is sung to a babe in a cradle), sometimes fiercely bitter ("The coughing of kids with hungry eyes"). Composer and librettist have managed a thousand arresting fragments, and, once or twice a sustained melodic line that swells with dramatic force.

• • •

Director Howard da Silva has found astonishing variety—and, in a couple of instances, vivid theatrical excitement—in the oppressive materials of this working-man's "ballad." A quartet sung in a crowded tenement—with diapers on the clothesline, a growler of beer being handed back and forth, and a pregnant woman walking her feet off—is superbly detailed. A hair-rising climax in a flooded tunnel, with four men frantically trying to open a jammed compression chamber, is brought off with almost staggering credibility.

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And choreographer Sophie Maslow, denied any sort of dance on the somber main storyline, has invented a thread of children's caperings that wind in and out of the offering with simple enchantment. Miss Maslow has used the most obvious patterns in the world—skipping rope, rolling hoops, girl-partners capering with their noses in the air, a batch of buoyant kids hallooing a coal-barge and leapfrogging erratically across the stage. But there is a perfect relationship between the antics and the score they are set to, and these impeccable young dancers soar over the stage like leaves in a bright autumn breeze.

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When all the virtues of "Sandhog" have been listed, however, there is still an overcast feeling, one that tends to grow as the evening progresses, to be accounted for. In part, this is due to the background itself: short of the majesty and tragic force of out-and-out opera, it is hard to see how such implacable materials can expand into genuine exhilaration.

It is also possible that the authors, in adapting their book of sorrows from a short story by Theodore Dreiser, have been more attentive to the sociological implications of the Hudson River theme than to the personal, private, and truly touching moods of the human beings involved. Even at home in the tenement, a husband and wife spent less time on love than on looking for a quarter for the gas meter. On the street, a widow is apt to point out in song that "It's not my loss you're mourning, it's your own." From time to time some one jocularly tosses in a "No shop talk, Fred!" But "Sandhog" reverts to shop talk fairly often; the people diminish in appeal in proportion as they turn into issues. In the end the somewhat dry and editorial atmosphere of the "issues" kills off what is most lyrical about the work.

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The performances are first-rate. Jack Cassidy, cocky and ebullient as a young Irishman determined to become foreman, struts, sings and hurls himself into an underwater tight-spot with wonderful vigor. Betty Oakes is attractive as his workaday wife who would still like to keep "sweat" out of the conversation. Alice Ghostley sings a rueful tune about a forgotten Glenside touchingly, and David Brooks does a lively job as a friendly fellow who hasn't "the lack of character" to take a job he's not fitted for. Howard Bay's multiple setting—built around an iron stairwell that winds its way down under the river—is stunning.

The pieces that go to make up "Sandhog" are almost uniformly impressive. But the show they make has, somehow, a heavy heart.

The New York Times

November 24, 1954

Ballad in 3 Acts Based on Story by Dreiser

By BROOKS ATKINSON

THANKS to the Phoenix Theatre, another original musical has come to Second Avenue. It is "Sandhog," which opened there last evening.

Some testy reservations will be recorded further along in this review, where they will be less conspicuous. Here it is proper to point out that Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt, the authors, and a long list of associates have told in musical form the story of digging a tunnel under the North River in the Eighteen Eighties. "Sandhog" is based on a short story by Theodore Dreiser, "St. Columba and the River," which was based, in turn, on an actual episode. For it is true that a sandhog was blown up through the muck to the surface of the river and lived to tell the tale.

Since Mr. Robinson composed "Ballad for Americans," it is logical for him to call "Sandhog" a "ballad in three acts." That may also account for the fact that the "Sandhog Song" has a stirring and familiar musical ring. Mr. Robinson and Mr. Salt have told the story of a cocky Irish immigrant who gets a job digging a tunnel under the river, marries and has twins, becomes involved in a fatal accident, leaves the tunnel, returns when his money has gone and becomes the man who is blown up through the river in the last scene.

By using his brains as well as his slide-rule, Howard Bay has built a unit set that manages to catch an impression of New York on the surface and serve also as the tunnel and the entrance through the air-lock. Most of the story is told in music, embellished with saucy sidewalk dancing designed by Sophie Maslow.

Since the music is chiefly in narrative form (incidentally with too much recitative for this column's taste) there are fewer "song hits" than the routine musical play yields. But the Irish melody, "Johnny O," gloriously sung by Jack Cassidy and Betty Oakes, is a beguiling piece of work. Alice Ghostley's "By the Glenside" is another romantic number, and she sings it enchantingly. David Brooks, a splendid singer and likable actor, has a number of utilitarian songs—like "Work Song" and "Sweat Song," which are an essential part of the story. He sings them with gusto and affability. The score as a whole is not exactly inspired. But it does succeed in the considerable feat of expressing a long, human story in terms of joy, fear, mourning and exultation, and must be set down as a notable achievement on that technical account.

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And now for those reservations. Since it is the story of a fabulous construction job, "Sandhog" somehow seems too mannered and genteel, as though it came out of the minds of the authors rather than the muscles and bones of the workmen. There are a couple of scenes in the tunnel, both of them rude, sinewy and exciting. But the skeleton of "Sandhog" is hardly more than the conventional story of an immigrant who gets married, has friends and troubles and in the final scene succeeds.

To most of us, construction jobs seem like heroic works. They are Paul Bunyan labors, and they should be told on a big scale. "Sandhog" is a little on the academic side, as if Mr. Robinson and Mr. Salt were on the outside looking in. It lacks size, depth and vigor.

No doubt, that is counsel of perfection. For it is obvious that in the musical drama field, "Sandhog" is enterprising and versatile. As the director, Howard Da Silva has woven the multitudinous details of a big production into a fabric of music, story and dancing. This is another one of the things that only the Phoenix can do; and, again, the Phoenix has done it.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 24, 1954

'Sandhog' Comes Up For Air at Phoenix

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new musical work at the Phoenix Theater is called "Sandhog," and is billed as a "ballad."

These two words are rather fatefully indicative of the project's nature. There is nothing very lyrical, but much that is confusingly technical, about the profession of a sandhog, a man who digs tunnels under rivers.

As for calling this musical play a "ballad," the designation is practically a dodge. It seems intended to cover the lack of specific character throughout the drama, as well as the rarity of narrative action.

In all truth, "Sandhog" plays like something which was written to be recorded, rather than performed in person.

Dangerous Work.

It concerns a group of youthful men, most of them Irish, who have emigrated to escape poverty in the '80's. They are hired for the dirty, dangerous work of forcing a tunnel under the North River from Manhattan to Jersey.

One of the newest recruits is made a foreman, and in carrying out his employer's orders, causes the death of several of his friends.

For a while he is afraid to work in the tunnel. Finally he returns, and comes out a hero. When there is a leak of air, he forces his own body into the fissure. As if by explosive magic, he is shot up through the water into the air above, and saved.

Songs Not Entertaining.

The nature of the men's work leads the authors into composing some highly technical and clinical lyrics. The song about the bends and an ode to sweat, for instance, are not in the least entertaining, but neither are they powerful enough to be truly dramatic.

There is a good deal of music, lots of it monotonous. It rarely asserts any original character or dramatic impact. The tunes are well enough sung, but these songs do not characterize the singers, nor do they move the narrative ahead. They are usually descriptions of mood or background.

Of the whole score the only melody that sticks with you is a love lyric called "Johnny O."

A great failing is the lack of individuality of any of the characters. They are figureheads without even enough quality so they can be adequately described.

David Brooks plays a hearty old hand at sand hogging, and Alice Ghostley is his philosophical wife. Jack Cassidy is the new foreman, and Betty Oakes is his young wife who has twins. They all sing pleasantly.

It is hard to know exactly why "Sandhog" is so utterly unsatisfactory, because it is hard to guess what its creators wanted to do. If this was meant as a saga praising some men who gave their lives to build this country, it certainly denies them the heroism and robustness they must have had.

Howard Bay has given the work a well integrated physical production. It permits a good deal of suspense in the tunnel scenes, even when the technical aspects of the work are inexplicable.

New York Post

November 24, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Of Tunnel-Building and Music

"Sandhog," which is described as "a ballad in three acts," is a musical play dealing with the building of the first tunnel under the Hudson. It has a fresh and colorful subject, and much of it is vigorous and pictorially effective. To it goes the credit for setting out to do something striking and original in the way of dramatic Americana. But it is somehow lacking in the final touch of creative imagination that might have transformed it from a worthy effort into an exciting achievement, and the Phoenix Theater, where it opened last night, is still, I fear, suffering from second-season pains.

Although it is not done entirely in music, as was "The Golden Apple" of last season and happy memory, Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt, its composer and librettist, have told their story chiefly in song and a children's ballet. "Sandhog" is at its best when it is going in for a kind of musical documentary effect, showing the mysteries, wonders and terrors of tunnel-building in the eighties. When it is dramatizing disaster and heroism under ground, it achieves its best moments, and they are excellent.

But it is not, I think, particularly happy in its use of a story. Based on a Theodore Dreiser tale which I don't know, called "St. Columba and the River," its narrative has to do with a young Irish immigrant who gets a job as a sandhog, is made a foreman, draws down on himself the antagonism of his fellow workers by what they see as his subservience to the bosses, and finally becomes a hero by risking his life in a threatened disaster. It has its pleasant atmospheric touches, but lacks the driving dramatic power that I believe it requires.

Because a considerable part of it deals with the resentment of the sandhogs against the hardships and dangers of their job, it might be suspected that the "ballad in three acts" was about to go in for the kind of social-protest drama popular in the thirties. But the suspicious and the timorous needn't worry. For better or for worse, "Sandhog" sticks to its atmosphere, its songs and dances, and its bit of domestic sentiment, and, although it never gets particularly exciting, it certainly keeps away from editorializing.

Since the narrative is intended chiefly as a springboard for the music and local color, its lack of any particular dramatic stimulation might not seem especially important. And its atmospheric color is certainly captured pleasantly by Howard Bay's imaginative settings. But I thought Mr. Robinson's music, while pleasant and in the proper spirit, suffered from a certain uneventfulness and lack of distinction. Sophie Maslow has staged some attractive dances for a group of children, but I thought they, too, grew a little monotonous.

Although it seemed to me that the accents of Jack Cassidy as the young immigrant, Betty Oakes as his wife, and David Brooks as a fugitive Fenian indicated that they had been over from Ireland longer than the narrative suggests, all three of them handle their roles attractively. Alice Ghostley, who scored a hit as a comedienne in the last "New Faces," has little to do as another loyal wife. The five dancing children are pleasantly believable. I hate to seem patronizing to "Sandhog," but I must set it down as a commendable try.

Journal-American

November 24, 1954

New Musical In a Good Try

Fine Music and Acting Fails To Overcome Pedestrian Idea

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE ARE quite a few laudable, experimental-type features to "Sandhog," a musical by Earl Robinson and Waldo Salt which was presented at the Phoenix Theatre down on Second Avenue last night.

Some of the music is very good, so is much of the acting and singing; there is an engaging group of kids who dance, the single set is a broad and ambitious departure from anything seen in these parts for many a moon, and one has the impression that this is a fine uncompromising try all around, and certainly the kind that ought to be displayed at the Phoenix.

What's wrong with it in an uptown, or Broadway, sense seems to me to be two-fold. The story is concerned with the travail involved in building the Hudson Tunnel, around 1880, and this turns out to be somewhat inconsequential in light of recent events and lots of other tunnels.

I know it was a great, heroic effort and a guy got blown up through the river and Theodore Dreiser wrote a story about it, but somehow this seems hollow stuff today unless it is made unusually dramatic.

And I don't think it is in "Sandhog." I thought the idea of having a small teen-age chorus was fine and I was captivated by their initial performance and the way so many of the musical numbers were presented even after that.

"Johnny O" is a solid song and "Fugue on a Hot Afternoon in a Small Flat" is a monument to ingenuity, and wonderfully well rendered in quartet. There are so many such things, including the ballet with hoops symbolic of the tunnel, but I didn't think they quite came off, not enough to justify the total effort

Even the set didn't really work. For a time I'm sure we were all entranced with the idea that so much could be going on within this single perimeter: the tunnel, the tunnel works, Sharkey's saloon and Cavanagh's flat. But everything came apart at the seams when the chips were down; there was no authenticity in the moments of action when it was most needed.

Fine Acting

I'm saying that it was a pedestrian idea to begin with, and that it wasn't worked out with enough eminence to carry the evening.

This does not detract from the contributions of the principals, however. An accolade to Jack Cassidy, Betty Oakes, David Brooks, Alice Ghostley, Gordon Dilworth, Douglas Collins, Mordecai Bauman, Mareda Gaither and the rest. And to Howard Bay for almost succeeding in doing five sets in one.

The Phoenix was founded as an experimental theatre and with productions like "Sandhog" it is fulfilling its mission.

"Wedding Breakfast"

Daily Mirror

November 22, 1954

Bright Dialogue Sparks 'Wedding Breakfast'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "Wedding Breakfast," which Kermit Bloomgarden brought to the Forty-Eighth St. Theatre Saturday evening, Theodore Reeves has penned some of the season's more amusing and accurate dialogue. But he has strung it on a scenario that appears to have been cut out with scissors and pasted together in a wobbly pattern.

Reeves is telling the story of a jilted girl whose ambition and muddled thinking almost cause her to be left without an engagement ring a second time. In the first instance, it was a young doctor who tossed her over for a pretty and well-to-do girl. Then through her own sister's fiance, she meets a nice and promising business man from Upstate.

HE IS WILLING to visit art museums, attend concerts and do just about everything else this snobbish magazine researcher considers a part of culture. But she wants to change his life all over again—even though he had done a lot of anguished changing himself, a few years before, when he got out of the Navy.

Is she satisfied with a boy who has studied business administration, has plans to expand his father's electric appliance store and gives indications of being a good provider? Nope. She wants him to be a lawyer, doctor or dentist, and is willing to accept her sister and future brother-in-law's savings to put him through school.

The girl's sense of values is distorted. Through most of the play she is unsympathetic and selfish. She demands more from others than she herself is capable of contributing. What she needs is a good kick where it will do the most good, but then the evening would end much too soon. Her about-face in the last act was more than a little arbitrary and unconvincing.

LEE GRANT, ONE of our better young actresses, pleads the cause of the irritating researcher with a goodly measure of eloquence and more heart than Reeves provided for her. Anthony Franciosa not only looks the part of the agreeable but not-to-be-pushed-around Upstater, but plays him with rugged honesty.

But it is Harvey Lembeck and Virginia Vincent who offer the pleasantest and most entertaining moments as a couple of straight-forward, not overly bright innocents who know what they want. And you know they'll eventually get it.

REEVES HAS GIVEN them lines that catch the very spirit and essence of a lot of New Yorkers. Here is genuine and pungent humor, often touching and illuminating. What Miss Vincent and Lembeck do with it adds up to irresistibly warming and ingratiating playing.

Herman Shumlin's direction does much to pull together a choppy and episodic script. William and Jean Eckart have designed settings that also help a lot toward this end.

"Wedding Breakfast" has its quota of faults, but there are virtues, too. Reeves' turns of phrase can be riotously funny, and tender. We think there is an audience for the new arrival. The first-nighters gave it one of the most enthusiastic receptions any play has received thus far this season.

"WEDDING BREAKFAST"

Play by Theodore Reeves; staged by Herman Shumlin; settings and lighting by William and Jean Eckart; costumes by Edith Lutyens; presented by Kermit Bloomgarden at the 48th Street Theatre, November 20, 1954. The cast:

Ruth.....Virginia Vincent
Norman.....Harvey Lembeck
Stella.....Lee Grant
Ralph.....Anthony Franciosa

Journal-American

November 22, 1954

Too Much Ado About Little

Love 'Problems' Beset Cast, But Chair Takes Top Seat

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE most rewarding incidents in "Wedding Breakfast," a new play by Theodore Reeves which was served Saturday night at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre, were not written by Theodore Reeves. In the second act one of the actors inadvertently bumped into a chair, knocking it off the platform on which the scene was being played and carrying with it the coat of the only other actor in the episode.

This got quite a laugh in itself, especially when one of the actors said, ad lib, "Well, there goes the chair." There followed a lot of serious dialogue, all written by Mr. Reeves and dealing with the plot, but then it became apparent that somebody was going to have to retrieve the fallen coat, and when Harvey Lembeck scrambled out of the range of the stage lights and came back with both the chair and the coat you would have thought he had scored the winning touchdown. The audience cheered.

But that was not sufficient to make the play a success. For even by then the customers had been assailed by a seemingly endless and often inept consideration of the problems confronting two couples who really had no problems.

Lee Gifted

One boy and one girl have put off getting married for two years because they want to save enough money to get married comfortably. (People I know get married and worry about all that later). The other girl is in love with her boy but won't accept him because he is merely a merchant and she wants him to be an intellectual. (So he becomes the president of Macy's—is that bad?)

Along the way there is a deluge of chatter, most of it written in a strange idiom which features the deletion of all but the key words in most sentences. And it seemed to me that the whole thing was directed with an intensity that the situations didn't warrant.

On the bright side there is the fact that the cast is extremely competent, and certainly deserved a more provocative vehicle. Lee Grant, recalled for her brilliant contribution in "Detective Story," carries the burden of the play's more serious sequences and again exhibits her gifts as an actress of depth and consequences.

Virginia Vincent, playing her devoted sister, reveals herself as an accomplished comedienne, and Mr. Lembeck easily dominates the proceedings in its lighter moments. Anthony Franciosa, the only other member of the company, is somewhat handicapped by an implausible role and the fact he is required to substitute vigor for conviction.

William and Jean Eckart have run up a single set which serves as two living rooms and a hunk of Central Park, and Herman Shumlin has directed—although I wonder why he thought it was possible to extract any eminence from this play.

Whatever happens, they should retain the falling chair bit. It was hilarious.

New York Post

November 22, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Play About Two Young Couples

Plays, too, can suffer from split personalities. Take, for example, the case of Theodore Reeves' "Wedding Breakfast," which opened Saturday night at the 48th St. Theater. It is a four-character comedy, divided down the middle, with two of the players chiefly carrying on the humorous portion of the story, while the other two have the serious aspects to delineate. And the humor is so real, pleasant and touching, and is so attractively acted by Virginia Vincent and Harvey Lembeck, that it is all the greater pity when the serious side lets it down so badly.

I'll place the complimentary things first today. In something of the memorable manner of Arthur Kober in "Having Wonderful Time," Mr. Reeves is telling ruefully of two young New Yorkers deeply in love and forced to put off their marriage until they have saved enough money from their small salaries. The boy is intellectually ambitious and addicted to lectures at Cooper Union, and the girl is possibly not too bright but capable of great devotion and loyalty, and there is a winning quality of modest heroism in their gallant but delayed romance.

One Pair

The author has written their scenes with truth, humor, insight and compassion, and he is fortunate in having the roles played by Miss Vincent and Mr. Lembeck. She is the excellent young actress who scored a hit in a failure called "Twilight Walk" a few years ago, and she has a delightful capacity for making a character comic and a little foolish, and yet immensely touching and very sweet. He, who was seen here in "Mister Roberts" and "Stalag 17," is a fine comedian, who can give a rich warmth and humanity to the part of an average, well-meaning fellow.

Unfortunately, the wedding breakfast of the title is not that of this appealing and steadily entertaining pair. They are merely the humorous counter point to the serious couple in whom Mr. Reeves' chief interest is centered. What concerns the author is the havoc that can be wrought by a girl who is bent on changing the character of her sweetheart to fit her preconceived ideal. It may, so far as I know, be an entirely sound point that he is making, but it results merely in a fatal interruption of what is interesting in his play.

The Other Pair

This girl, the serious sister of the other one, is a researcher on a news magazine, and she has become neurotic after being jilted by a former lover, whom she had helped to be a doctor. The new young man works in his father's hardware store, but she insists that he become a professional man of some kind before she marries him. It is the scenes between these two that overwhelm the attractiveness of the secondary story. I gather we're supposed to be sympathetic to the unhappy young woman, but she put me on the side of the man who got away.

It assuredly isn't the fault of Lee Grant and Anthony Franciosa that the roles of the researcher and the young business man are so trying and their scenes so annoying. They are both talented players, and I'm sure they do everything possible with the parts to which they are assigned. But I must admit I was always more comfortable when they disappeared and left the stage to Miss Vincent and Mr. Lembeck, who are the treasures of the evening. When "Wedding Breakfast" is good, it is very good, indeed, but my unhappy impression is that too much of it is not.

New York Herald Tribune

November 22, 1954

THEATER

'Wedding Breakfast'

By WALTER F. KERR

Friendly Foursome

HALFWAY through the second act of "Wedding Breakfast," I'd have sworn that no man in his right mind could ever turn on Lee Grant. In the new Theodore Reeves play which opened at the 48th Street on Saturday night, Miss Grant is playing a forlorn, but infinitely appealing, career girl who's just been chucked by her lover and who is about ready to call it quits with the world. The performance, from the first curtain, is a beautiful one.

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The actress must begin the evening with a drawn mouth, a cynically flashing eye, and a habit of hanging around the apartment in an untidy dressing-gown. But as she begins to brush off the well-intentioned efforts of her adoring sister to push her in the direction of an available male, something more than simple bitterness swims into view. There is candor in the girl: Miss Grant is wonderfully wry about herself as she evades the overtures of a bumptious young man. There is humor: in so slight a gesture as the business of hopelessly trying to avoid taking a telephone call, Miss Grant is funny and instinctively true. And as she finds herself warming to her determined suitor, as she lets him persuade her that moonlight in the park is something to be trusted, her hesitant and fearful surrender to happiness is quickly moving. It is easy to believe that an exuberant stranger has been bowled over by this lass in no time at all, because you have been, too.

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Then something curious happens. For nearly two acts "Wedding Breakfast" has been a charming minor study in urban folkways. Its four genial characters—the career girl, her sister, her sister's long-suffering boy friend, and the unexpected swain from out of town—have swapped dates, struggled through Italian coffee, looked at their bankbooks to see if marriage is possible, and batted back and forth some engagingly authentic New York patois. "They don't care tomorrow," snarls the boy friend about people who refuse to take marriage seriously, "they drink cocktails and live furnished." The red-headed sister, planning some romantic strategy, murmurs: "You don't know yet, but tomorrow night I'm thinking strapless." The idiom—it belongs to the school of the Hoff cartoons—has been steadily engaging, the city-bred attitudes have been amusing, the people have been solid gold.

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Suddenly the light texture—the feeling that it's all being done amiably in pen and ink—hardens. The vein of random, innocently rakish improvisation runs out. The career girls, whose sentimental problem has just about been solved, turns up a new problem—and a serious one. She is, it seems, stubbornly ambitious, a bit of a professional snob. First thing you know, she's playing rather unattractive tricks on her newfound love, scheming to turn him into some one else, exposing her self as a creature of calculated wiles.

Even as she adapts herself to this unforeseen switch in the tone of the play, Miss Grant is extraordinarily skillful. Each damaging little nuance is believable enough as it comes, each artful dodge made perfectly plausible in the playing. But damage is done, and it is widespread: sympathy for the girl goes flying out the apartment window, concern for the boy vanishes in the same proportion, and the rich good humor of the play's earlier sequences is replaced by an overdrawn and rather whining sobriety.

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The lapse is doubly disappointing there is so much merit in the writing and in the generally delightful performances. Mr. Reeves has a fine ear for idiomatic banter: I don't think there is a carelessly written line in the play. Herman Shumlin has directed the small ensemble with vitality and grace: Virginia Vincent is enormously engaging as the helpful sister with a gigantic heart and a face like a perpetual question-mark; Harvey Lembeck is endlessly genial as her sometimes doting, sometimes exasperated fiance; Anthony Franciosa is excellent as a suitor filled with high animal spirits and plain common sense. William and Jean Eckart have provided a fluid and atmospheric double-decker set.

In short, "Wedding Breakfast" is packed with talent. But in evolving from an observant light comedy into a somewhat more ambitious straight "play," it overreaches—and double-crosses—itself.

The New York Times
November 22, 1954

Theatre: Gotham Cameo

By BROOKS ATKINSON

THEODORE REEVES has written a small and winning play. "Wedding Breakfast," he calls it. It opened with a beautiful performance at the Forty-eighth Street on Saturday evening.

There are only four characters—two sisters and two young men. Naturally, Mr. Reeves devotes his ingenuity to getting them married, and in good time he succeeds. But the story is less significant than the characters. Perhaps, in fact, the story is the characters, for nothing happens outside their orbits.

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One of the sisters is a good-hearted salesgirl at a perfume counter. Ruth, for that is her name, is carefully putting her money in a joint savings account with Norman against the day when they can be married. Ruth and Norman represent order, thrift, prudence and respectability—and selflessness, too. For Mr. Reeves is no snob. They speak platitudes, but he knows that they are the salt of the earth.

The other sister, Stella, has put herself through school and aspires to culture. Working as a researcher for a news magazine, she has big ideas about the intellectual life, a brilliant career and distinguished friends. As the genius of the family, she quietly accepts her sister's love and planning. Essentially, "Wedding Breakfast" is the story of how closely Stella comes to losing the young man she loves because she tries to remake him into her idea of the glamorous professional man.

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Everything about "Wedding Breakfast" is in cameo size—the cast, the dialogue, the manners, the problems. But they are big enough to make a touching and beguiling drama. For Mr. Reeves is aware of the spirit of his characters and writes about them with respect. There are some heroic moments in his little Gotham tale. Although the characters are commonplace, Ruth's selflessness is epic in quality, and Stella's sacrifice of pride is agonizing and moving. Mr. Reeves avoids big words but he discovers big emotions in his people.

The performance is one of the most sensitive Herman Shumlin has directed. In the early scenes, before the situation is really defined, the pace is self-consciously slow, the lines are separated by arty pauses and the rhythm is soporific. But once the story starts to develop, Mr. Shumlin directs it with passion and clarity of outline in the style of his best work.

In the drab part of Ruth, Virginia Vincent gives a superb performance with a babyish voice, a humble manner and a gigantic spirit. Although she is amusing, she creates a valiant character. As Norman, her fiancé, Harvey Lembeck is affable, but tempestuous in voice and movement when the play begins to close around him. Miss Vincent and Mr. Lembeck make vivid characters out of familiar people.

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Anthony Franciosa is excellent as the towering male who falls in love with Stella, but leaves her when he has a glimpse inside her scheming mind. And Lee Grant is admirable as Stella—never too condescending when she is queen of the ménage, never too meek and obsequious when her sweetheart dethrones her. She retains Stella's dignity in a reticent performance that is small in scope but vibrant in feeling.

As the scene designers, William and Jean Eckart have provided two living rooms in two apartments simultaneously on view though alternately lighted. At least one of them is perhaps too charming for Mr. Reeves' simple purposes.

"Wedding Breakfast" is a miniature play about undistinguished people, but written and acted with insight, principle and admiration. Not many plays get so close to the hearts of their characters.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun
November 22, 1954

'Wedding Breakfast' Mixes Laughs, Tears

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Wedding Breakfast" is a comedy about young love which manages to be hilarious and poignant, often at the same time.

The new play by Theodore Reeves, at the 48th St., has some rare dialog. It ranks with the work of such masters as Arthur Kober and Gertrude Berg for its expression of the warm humor of modest people.

"Wedding Breakfast" tells of two sisters in Greenwich Village. One has intellectual ambitions She has put herself through school and works for Time. An affair with a professional man has ended with her being jilted.

The other sister is simplicity itself. She sells cosmetics in a department store, while she and her long-term fiance save up to get married.

Plan for Happiness.

The lovers set out to enhance the other sister's life by supplying her with a beau in the person of the fiance's cousin, who works in his father's hardware store in Buffalo.

The girl with sophisticated pretensions decides to make something "worthwhile" out of the happy storekeeper. In the process she very nearly ruins her own love life and her sister's as well.

Most of one's sympathies inevitably go with the simpler couple. They are charmingly written characters, determined, alive and resilient. They are also beautifully played.

Harvey Lembeck is delightful as the bookkeeper who lets his culture come naturally. He is bombastic, tender and desperate, but all he does adds up to a believable person you believe when he says, "I understand better what I don't know."

Right for Role.

Virginia Vincent and her role of the simpler, generous sister, were both blessed when they met. Rarely have you seen a part and an actress happier with each other.

Her quaint speech rolls out with spontaneity. She captures all the gentle strength of this sensitive girl. She can also assign an audience to tears with a couple of words or a quick smile.

Lee Grant has a less grateful role as the intellectual sister. During the first part of the play, she is called on to be determinedly and elegantly sorry for herself, which she does with cool grace. But when she has to accept her sister's savings to fulfill her fanciful ambition, one loses sympathy and touch with her.

In the latter scenes, desperate and fighting, she is warm and moving.

The fourth corner of the quadrangle—the man from Buffalo—is played attractively by Anthony Franciosa. He is a handsome and forceful young actor who needs more than anything to find some way to relax on the stage. He is winning and honest, even when his tenseness becomes too noticeable.

This is surely not a great play, but it is a lovable one and an appealing one. Herman Shumlin has given it the most carefully lyrical direction, which illustrates its moods in a fine manner.